

Testimony in SUPPORT of SB284:
“An Act Increasing the Age from Eight to Eighteen Years for an Income-Eligible Person to Obtain
Medical Assistance Regardless of Immigration Status”

Dear Members of the Human Services Committee of Connecticut General Assembly:

My name is Jemma Benson and I am an internal medicine physician in New Haven.

I stand in support of SB284: AN ACT INCREASING THE AGE FROM EIGHT TO EIGHTEEN YEARS FOR AN INCOME-ELIGIBLE PERSON TO OBTAIN MEDICAL ASSISTANCE REGARDLESS OF IMMIGRATION STATUS. Expanding access to HUSKY up to age 18 regardless of immigration status is an important step in making sure our immigrant community has access to the healthcare we all need and deserve. But our work doesn't end with expanding access up to age 18; we need to open access to HUSKY and healthcare to all immigrants of any age, including parents and adults.

I have cared for undocumented patients in New Haven for over three years. Throughout that time, I have seen the devastating impact that a lack of health insurance has on undocumented immigrant families. I spent the spring of 2020 working in the COVID ICU. There, I saw patients who had severe illness from COVID who were more worried about how they would pay the hospital bill than the illness itself. These delays in care are not limited to just COVID. I have cared for undocumented patients who came to the hospital with advanced presentations of illnesses because they could not obtain preventive care or earlier treatment due to a lack of health insurance. As a physician, it is deeply upsetting to see a very ill or dying patient and know that their illness could have prevented if they had health insurance. Over the years, I have been unable to obtain essential health needs for my undocumented patients: home oxygen, physical therapy, imaging studies, routine vaccinations. When caring for patients who are uninsured and ineligible for Husky, we often must use medications that are not the standard of care. As a physician, it pains me not to be able to provide the care for my undocumented patients that I would want for my own family.

In addition to the pain of not being able to provide optimal care for undocumented patients, there are other costs as well. I have seen patients sent to the Emergency Department for non-emergent care because of an inability to obtain outpatient treatments for them. I have done this myself. I have also seen patients kept inpatient for longer periods of time than necessary to obtain work-ups that could have been performed outpatient, as the medical team knew these couldn't be obtained as an outpatient if the patient did not have health insurance. These unnecessary Emergency Department presentations and increased length of hospitalizations strain already overburdened healthcare systems.

While I care for adult patients, I know that health as an adult starts with health in childhood. I have cared for many young adults with diseases like diabetes and asthma that require preventive care in childhood. A lack of health insurance in childhood has far-reaching impacts into adulthood, and expansion of Husky for children up to age 18 regardless of immigration status is crucial. Yet we should expand Husky to people of all ages regardless of immigration status. Undocumented immigrants were disproportionately essential workers throughout the pandemic; in 2018, there were 58,200 undocumented immigrants in the state of Connecticut who were essential workers.² However, the undocumented community has suffered immensely during COVID due to high rates of illness and a lack of health insurance.³ We saw throughout the pandemic how interconnected our health is, and how vital it is to ensure that all members of our community have health insurance.

I support S.B. 284, and I ask the committee to support and pass this legislation. Looking forward, I ask the committee to work towards opening access to all community members in CT regardless of age or status.

Thank you for your time,
Jemma Benson MD

1. Kerwin D, Warren R. US Foreign-Born Workers in the Global Pandemic: Essential and Marginalized. *Journal on Migration and Human Security*. 2020;8(3):282-300.
2. Kerwin D, Nicholson M, Alulema D, Warren R. US Foreign-Born Essential Workers by Status and State, and the Global Pandemic. The Center for Migration Studies of New York; 2020.
3. Page KR, Flores-Miller A. Lessons We've Learned — Covid-19 and the Undocumented Latinx Community. *New England Journal of Medicine* 2020;384:5-7